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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515–6115

MAJORITY (202) 225–2927
FACSIMILE (202) 225–2525
MINORITY (202) 225–3641

energycommerce.house.gov

Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce
"The Future of Coal under Climate Legislation"
Subcommittee on Energy and Environment
March 10, 2009

Today's hearing is about the future of coal. As we seek to reduce both domestic and global greenhouse gas emissions, addressing the use of coal will be at the center of our efforts in the years to come.

The United States has abundant reserves of coal, and generating electricity from coal is inexpensive relative to other fuel types. Currently, roughly half of our nation's power is supplied by coal.

Although coal is abundant, the emissions resulting from its use are massive. Burning coal results in roughly twice as much carbon dioxide being emitted as compared to using natural gas.

Coal-fired power plants, which are large and typically have life spans measured in decades, can emit millions of tons of carbon dioxide per year. Today about 80% of the CO_2 emissions from domestic electricity generation come from coal.

The United States and other countries are recognizing that there is simply no way we can continue using coal the way we do today if we intend to tackle climate change in a meaningful way.

States, energy companies, and particularly the investment community have all begun to understand this new reality. With EPA regulation of carbon pollution imminent, new coal facilities are facing longer delays and more cancellations.

Climate change legislation that provides a framework for the substantial reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and that lays down clear rules going forward, will provide certainty to the marketplace.

This is necessary to protect our planet and necessary to ensure the long-term viability of coal, both domestically and globally.

Today's hearing will examine the technologies that could allow for the continued use of coal while substantially reducing carbon dioxide emissions. In particular, we will hear about the technologies that will enable us to capture carbon and store it in geologic formations underground.

I believe these technologies hold great promise. The individual components of carbon capture and storage, or CCS technologies, are well-understood, and in many cases have been used in industrial settings for years. The challenge ahead of us is putting all the pieces together in a way to enable the cost-effective production of low-carbon electricity from coal.

Today's hearing will explore the ways in which federal climate legislation can help industry deploy CCS to realize its full economic and technical potential. Accomplishing that objective is essential if coal use is to be part of our nation's low-carbon energy future.

I look forward to hearing the input of our witnesses on what role coal can play as we seek to address the threat of global climate change and as we transform our nation's economy to low-carbon sources of power.